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FEBRUARY 13 1979

Dear Senator Schmitt:

Thank you for your letter of January 9 on behalf of several constituents concerned about the use of their tax dollars to pay for the transportation of the bodies involved in the tragedy of Jonestown, Guyana to the United States for burial.

The tragedy of Jonestown has no parallel. On Sunday, November 19, the U.S. Government faced a crisis situation in Guyana. A U.S. Congressman and others in his party had been killed. A settlement believed to include about 1,000 Americans was involved, and its situation was uncertain. It was apparent that the limited transportation and other resources of the Government of Guyana might be insufficient to cope with these events in an isolated area 120 miles from the capital. Medical evacuation for the injured Americans by U.S. military aircraft was immediately authorized, and the U.S. Government offered assistance to the Government of Guyana to prevent further loss of life.

The Guyanese indicated they needed helicopter lift and other support. As events progressed, it became evident that many Americans were dead. For a time, it was believed that there might be many survivors in the jungle, and the United States adjusted and increased its assistance to help the search by Guyana police and military. Finally, when the number of dead was clear, the operational requirements were to continue support of the extensive ongoing investigation of serious crimes and to identify, treat with dignity, and remove the bodies as quickly as possible to a facility that could deal with this immense problem. Extensive mortuary facilities were essential in the process of identification and investigation. Only the U.S. military had the equipment and facilities to handle this enormous problem. The removal of the bodies from Guyana was at the specific request of the Government of Guyana.

The President, acting under his constitutional authority as Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed

The Honorable
Harrison Schmitt,
United States Senate.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
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forces, ordered the departments of our government to take action to deal with this emergency. The operational decisions within the U.S. Government in this unique situation were made by the Secretary of State in conjunction with other members of the Cabinet.

The Federal Government does not ordinarily pay to bring back the remains of Americans who die abroad. That is a responsibility of their families. If no next of kin can be found, the country where the death occurred is responsible for burial. It was evident, however, that it was beyond the ability of individual families or of the facilities available in Guyana to resolve the unprecedented problems that characterized this situation. In fact, it was not even clear who the next of kin were without identification being established. The families of those who died at Jonestown are, of course, expected to bear the responsibility for the disposition of the remains in the United States.

The costs to the Government of an effort of this magnitude obviously are considerable although substantially less than the $1 million figure used in some press reports. It will be some time before the total is known. The Office of Management and Budget, together with other agencies, is reviewing the financial aspects.

The Department of Justice is fully exploring possible legal remedies which can be used to recover the cost the U.S. Government has incurred in removing and processing the bodies of Americans from Guyana. It will be some time before the results of these efforts are known, but you may be assured that we will continue to make every effort to keep the costs to the U.S. Government to the minimum necessary.

Sincerely,

CW

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations

Enclosure:

Correspondence returned.

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